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## ABSTRACT

An assignment was developed that requires each student in a communication class to observe the dynamic of classroom communication. In this way, both the students and the professor receive feedback about various communication roles both can take. Systematic observation systems can be defined as part of classificatory systems that record certain aspects of a classroom behavior as it occurs. Teaching systematic observation allows one to teach both method and content at the same time. The focus on communication allows the teacher to help prospective teachers learn about communication dynamics by analyzing actual data gained from systematic observation. Each student is required to observe the instructor and/or the class and make an oral report on the findings. The class and/or the instructor develops the question to be answered by the observation and the observation form to be used. Students are expected to recommend ways to improve the teaching/learning in the class in their reports. A typical list of observations over a semester includes: frequency of participation by each student, time of participation by each student, and the nature of each student's response in terms of content. The 10 activities given are valuable from two perspectives: a communication pattern can be improved, and students learn that a teacher can accept information from colleagues about improving instruction. Students can gain confidence in the critical process and become better prepared for asking others to observe them, and can learn from these suggestions. (MG)

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# TEACHING OBSERVATION BY BEING OBSERVED YOURSELF

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SU 4.09 Values and Concerns in Observing  
Student-Teacher Communication

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While teaching the Flanders Interaction Analysis system of observation as part of my class, "Communication in the Classroom," I had a group of students observe my teaching a class period. Knowing that teachers generally underestimate their percentage of time talking and overestimate the amount of time students talk, I made my best guess mentally to account for that phenomenon, and then subtracted another 10 percent from my share. When the student group reported, I was still 8 percent under my actual percentage and over the amount of time that students talk. Since I believed I had a high level of student discussion this result was a shock. But I realized right then, one major truth about the value of another person making an observation of teaching behavior--teachers often are not aware of many of their communicative choices while teaching.

Since that day in my classroom communication class, I developed an assignment that requires each student to observe the dynamic of classroom communication and report to the class. Thus, both students and the professor receive feedback about various communication roles both can take. This paper will explain the rationale for the assignment, a typical set of assignments for a ten week period, and the impact on my own teaching.

#### Rationale

Why Systematic Observation? Thomas Good and Jere Brophy wrote in *Looking in Classrooms* (1987, p. 57):

...neither teachers nor observers are likely to understand classroom behavior unless they know how to collect classroom information, know what behaviors to look for, and have a conceptual or theoretical framework to use in analyzing classroom behavior.

The attitudes to go with this type of data collection according to Good & Brophy are a willingness to understand the teaching process and a willingness to try different methods of analyzing instruction. To which, I add a willingness to interpret many teaching behaviors within a communication model. Communication teachers can add to their approach principles of communication. The communication perspective prevents the teacher from only looking at teaching from a methods of teaching model.

Systematic observation limits and frees up one's observation. Medley and Mitsel (1963) in the **Handbook of Research on Teaching** define systematic observation systems as part of classificatory system that records certain aspects of a classroom behavior as they occur. "Typically behaviors are recorded in the form of tallies, checks, or other marks which code them into predefined categories and yield information about which behaviors occurred, or how they occurred, during the period of observation (p. 253)." Cooper (1988) adapts systematic observation so that the teacher can analyze her behavior as to types of communication, response style, types and levels of questions, reinforcement procedures, and the general pattern of communication. Also, Good & Brophy in their

book have over 40 different forms for analyzing different teaching behaviors from use of individual praise to the teacher's use of time. This excellent source is often a good starting place, although its lack of a communication perspective is glaring.

The key metaphor for teaching systematic communication is the concept of it being the blinders for the observer, so that only a certain set of behaviors are perceived just as the horse's blinders prevent all the peripheral behaviors from being part of the focus. While observing one is looking for only a specific set of behaviors, so that an important qualification exists for any conclusions one makes with systematic observation. Yet, one is free to observe with a concentration that a general observer without categories cannot make, but one is limited by the categories presented.

Teaching systematic observation allows one to teach both method and content at the same time. For example, in teaching types of questions, the very act of presenting a categorical system of questions teaches both the types of questions for the categories as well as the idea that one can learn from the type of questions one asks. Thus, I like to teach at least two different types of question categories. Both teach their definitions while teaching that a different set of categories can lead to differing conclusions.

For example, if one is teaching Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives, the observer categorizes each question by one of the six categories. The content analysis of teaching relates to Gall's

research that shows that most (80 percent) questions do not require students to think (Cooper, 1988). The analysis of the communication patterns of the teacher relates to what type of questions were asked (frequency count of each category for one type of form), what the sequence of questions might be (another form for tracking the direction of a content area), and/or what types of students are answering what types of questions (a form focusing on all the students on one axis and the types of questions on another axis). This type of observation can be done over three different discussion sections, so that one can see the different types of analysis are used for analyzing discussions. Or, one can have three different student observers watching the same session, which also demonstrates the differences.

Thus, systematic observation helps the teacher learn about what is happening in terms of both teaching choices and communication patterns. The focus on communication allows the teacher to help prospective teachers learn about the communicating dynamics by analyzing actual data gained from systematic observation.

Why a communication perspective to systematic observation? If one defines a teacher as "a manager of a communication environment" (Sarbaugh, 1978), then communication becomes a theoretical framework for analyzing the results as well as a methodology from which to develop observational positions. A communication perspective deals with the creation of meaning between a sender and a receiver (teacher to student, student to teacher, and student

to student). Also one can analyze the system itself from a communication environment perspective. Thus, communication provides both categories from which to build an analytical system as well as a means of interpreting data.

For example, one could use Weaver's concern for the definition of rhetoric as a study of misunderstanding and its remedies. The teacher might ask students the question. How does misunderstanding occur in my classroom? To answer this question, the teacher then creates a categorical system of incidents from which misunderstanding might occur. The very first one is giving directions on assignments. Whatever criteria is being taught as the desirable way of giving assignments provides a set of categories that can be checked off each time the teacher gives assignments. The communication perspective about the development of meaning would require that some method be used to check the meaning developed by the students before they do the assignment (the most implied way). Thus, a communication perspective advances the direction of the work.

#### Using Observation of Self to Teach Students

According to the syllabus this assignment is one of many for the class. It consists of:

"Each student will separately or as part of team observe Dr. Boileau and/or the class and make an oral report on the findings. The class and/or Dr. Boileau will develop the question to be answered by the observation and the observation form to

be used. The student and/or team will report on the findings and develop conclusions on the teaching at the next class period. Students are expected to recommend ways to improve the teaching/learning in the class in this report."

While I grade this assignment on a completion aspect (maximum points available if it is done with competence), it could be graded. I do this type of evaluation because I want the students to feel that their grade is not dependent on praising me, or that their grade might be lowered because they might have several suggestions for improving my teaching.

The report may lead to us observing something that needs to be done. For example, one of the first assignments is to see what students are participating in class discussion. This simple frequency count type of observation raises the questions about the quality of the answers. Thus, the next period is most often followed by an observation that judges the quality of response.

Sometimes class rules for a day might be developed out of a discussion. Using this type of observation, we might discover that Roxanne and Janet are doing 40 percent of the comments. Therefore, the rule of the day will be that Roxanne and Janet cannot make a comment until the two least participants, Sue and Bob have made two comments each. This rule can be for the class or for the instructor. They can tell me not to call on Roxanne and Janet for the first half hour or to follow that procedure. The key is to demonstrate that an observation revealed a specific type of

communication pattern that might not be the best way to organize the class. Thus, we--both the students and the instructor--can change our communication patterns to reach a specific goal. This realization becomes even more important as the semester continues. More and more ideas develop as ways to improve the class--suggestions stemming from data gathered in this specific class.

Several basic patterns seem to develop for each class. The main stays of observation--participation, types of questions, types of feedback, quality of responses. lecturing behavior--seem to occur in each class. The key to this system is the ease at which forms can be developed. The following is a typical list of observations over a semester.

Observations in relationship to class participation.

1. Frequency of participation by each student. This chart places the number of times each person makes an oral comment behind the roll list. Students are asked to calculate the percentage of comments that each student makes. If several students on a team are doing this independently, we are immediately faced with the question of accuracy of observation. This discussion raises the questions of inter-rater reliability, so that questions of definition, fatigue, perspective, and position of the observer are discussed.

2. Time of participation by each student. This assignment requires a team so that one person can be looking at a watch, or stopwatch, while the other is recording the information. When paired, if the team is 3 or more students, with someone just doing

a straight frequency count, this observation helps one identify the importance of defining what is a response. If a timepiece is not used, that one can classify responses as to whether they are less than a sentence (word, or phrase), sentence length, two or three sentence, or a longer presentation.

3. Nature of each student's response in terms of content. This assignment has the observer categorize the responses as to a type of response. Each semester I let the class build their own categories. Last semester these were the categories:

- a) a comment that cites something from the book,
- b) a comment that refers to personal experience in teaching,
- c) a comment that refers to something another student has shared in this class,
- d) a comment that relates to something Dr. Boileau noted, and
- e) a comment that does not fit any of the above.

One semester this assignment used categories in relationship to the role the comment played in the class discussion:

- a) a comment that advanced the content of the discussion
- b) a comment that was not relevant to the discussion
- c) a comment that was procedural for the discussion
- d) a comment that supported the social goals of the group.

These classifications become very judgmental, so that if two or more students are observing a great amount of variance might occur.

#### Observations in relationship to question type.

1. Classifying questions by Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives. This type of chart generally uses a simple frequency

count. It works well while one is teaching the types, so that students have a chart with key words and typical questions terms (see Cooper, pp. 148-149 for a typical chart). ( See above for discussion of variations.)

2. As soon as we discuss the types of questions, students realize from a communication perspective that the answers seem to go with the questions, so that Good & Brophy's "Question-Answer-Feedback" charts (1987, pp.76-79,ff.) are an ideal way to observe this challenge. This type of coding starts the students into a different way of gathering data. For each question the teacher asks, the observer notes a) the sex of the student respondent, b) the type of response (1. right, 2. partially right, 3. wrong, or 4. no answer), c) the type of attitudinal feedback the teacher gives to the student's response (1. praise, 2. affirmation, 3. no reaction, 4. negative response, or 5. criticism of the student) and d) the type of communication pattern that the teacher uses which will operate as a set of simultaneous responses are also noted (1. gives answer, 2. asks another student, 3. another student calls out the answer, 4. teacher repeats the original question, 5. teacher rephrases the question, or 6. teacher asks a new question.

This type of chart is rich in data as it makes the observer look for patterns of communication by the teacher. One can either have several people using this, or use this over two periods as it gives a tremendous perspective on the teacher's style.

By this time, I try to have three students observe me (or three groups), so that the data can be compared. As soon as the

differing data is on the board, we can discuss differences in perception of the same data. Good & Brophy have an excellent chart of key issues (Table 3.2, p. 70) as to "Practical questions and issues related to assessing reliability." Such a discussion makes students aware that so many of the studies that they might be reading have this same type of limitation.

3. Spatial analysis is done by dividing the classroom into appropriate areas and then doing both a sequence and time analysis of the teacher's movement. While the richness of this observation is more often in a K-12 classroom, it raises many questions in discussing where I spend most of my time and what type of activity occurs in the various teaching locations. This activity can be followed up by relating to question patterns from specific areas, especially if the students have established territoriality in their seating.

4. Since positive feedback is an important variable to teaching, the Individual Praise form of Good & Brophy (p. 165) is used to track my responses. It is used whenever I praise an individual student. Eight different categories are used. Each student is given a number, so that the data gathered has both the student and the type(s) of behaviors observed. In most forms, an "other" category is used to individualize the form. The communication perspective is most important here, as the type of message might or might not be praise. The form also allows a discussion of who receives praise and who does not. One might also use the "individual criticism" form, although the times I use it

the observer generally complains that no action is recorded.

5. An other type of form, which often I use over several periods, are those for specific behaviors, such as communicating positive expectations to the class. Of the 11 behaviors on that form, one records only the presence of a comment that is made to the class as a whole. Such items, such as showing cooperation with the teacher, do not occur often.

6. Lectures should be critiqued. Each time I do this one the class develops the categories. Thus, they need to know what is important in lecturing, so this one follows a discussion of lecturing. Sometimes I bring public speaking evaluation forms in so that we start by adapting from some of those categories. In Cooper's book we read Chapter 5, "Sharing Information," as a starting point for the discussion. To go along with this, the Grant and Hennings form (Cooper, 1988, p.414-22) as to nonverbal behaviors is a good one for students to do a self-analysis on to go along with a discussion of my nonverbal behaviors during lecturing. This form can be the basis of one of their journal entries.

7. Formal observation forms such as Flanders Interaction Analysis System are used in terms of teams. I have discovered that the best way for me to teach this procedure is to have students work in teams so that one person is recording while another times. I start with 10 second intervals for the first observation.

8. Cooper has from "The Teaching Professor," a teacher behaviors inventory that allows students to rate me. By this time in the semester, the students have seen a wide variety of

behaviors. This evaluation not only gives me feedback, but also sets up an interesting discussion on how various students interpret my style of teaching. We start by noting the areas that most students seem to agree upon, and then move to discuss those evaluations about which a range of over 3 points exists.

9. At this point in the semester it is time to have the class develop their own forms. By now a variety of observation formats have been learned. What is difficult is that often so many ideas have been developed by the students, that they have difficulty agreeing upon what type of form they want to use. A basic principal of teaching improvement is that the individual faculty member should identify what might be improved. Thus, developing one's own form is a good idea.

10. Cooper has assembled a "Teacher's Communication Rating Scale" (p.426-28) that follows SCA's standards for effective communication for a teacher. This form is a good conclusion for the project. It teaches both the standards as well as providing a global evaluation form. Also, it is best used at the end of the teaching period so that a large range of behaviors can be evaluated.

#### Impact

While I wish that I could tell you that use of these procedures has made me the best teacher in the department, a more limited conclusion must be shared. Am I better at some behaviors? Yes. Several common problems seem to occur from out of my awareness, so that this type of feedback has made me aware of three

types of behaviors about which I try to make special efforts to correct. These are: a) praising students after a good response to a question, b) not jingling change in my pocket while lecturing, and c) identifying by name and/or title in the readings items being discussed in class.

Often the person making a report on the previous week's observation will be asked to identify what I should do differently to help change the classroom communication pattern. These activities are valuable from two perspectives. First, a communication pattern can be improved, e.g., not letting someone dominate a discussion, encouraging a non-participant to speak more often. Secondly, students learn that a teacher can take information from colleagues about improving instruction. Slowly the students learn that with everyone in the class making suggestions for improving my teaching, that I can take criticism. They in turn can gain confidence in the critical process. Hopefully, this activity prepares them for asking others to observe them and then they can learn from these suggestions.

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